

# Taking Positions - Figurative Sculpture and the Third Reich

**Henry Moore Institute, Leeds**

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John Hudson

**How do we look at the art of the Third Reich? Can we separate aesthetics from ideology or indeed from history and look from a neutral position?**

These are just a few of the questions posed by this exhibition. But then which of the artists selected were Nazis? The Nazis had a command of the ornamental and of the spectacle, especially in the work of Leni Riefenstahl, that darling of Hitler, who shot to infamy with her films of the Nuremberg Rally and the 1936 Olympics. A great filmmaker, one may say, compromised by nationalism, politics and racism. Nazi painting and sculpture on the other hand is pure kitsch. What Riefenstahl shares (on the surface at least) with the sculptors on show here is a glorification of Teutonic ideals and Aryan manhood.

The works date from 1918 to 1948, focusing specifically on the period 1933-1945, the years when Hitler was in power. The exhibition is divided into three rooms under the titles of **The Seated Man, The Standing Male (1935-1939)** and **The Standing Woman (1929-1945)**. The seated figures (all male) of the first room have an air of defeat about them, not so much navel-gazing as examining their own genitals. Look at Wilhelm Lehmbruck's **Seated Youth**, an oddly expressionistic piece dating from 1918, presumably after the defeat of Germany in the Great War. It can be compared to Käthe Kollwitz's **Fallen Man**, but I can only assume that it was made for entirely different reasons. Where Kollwitz hated war and nationalism, did Lehmbruck's piece express despair at defeat?

Gerhard Marcks' **Fallen Prometheus II** also has an expressionistic quality about it, a thoroughly modernist piece compared with many of the other figures. Dated 1948, did it express despair at the destruction of the Nazi regime or at the failure of postwar politics? The figure resembles Rodin's **Thinker** slumped to one side. It might be interesting to know that Marck was part of the Bauhaus and therefore censored by the Nazis, perhaps even imprisoned. How does this shape our opinion of the work? His **Swimmer II** is again almost modern in style in contrast to the more classical figures that surround it. An art deco-like nude pulling on a swimming cap. The male standing pieces are much larger than the female ones, which are often less than life size. Yet there is something quite camp about the male figures. For all their clenched fists and references to the classical art of Rome and Greece, they look more like mannequins from Top Man. The work of Breker, Hitler's favourite, just looks ridiculous.

How political or apolitical are these works? One cannot judge whether some, if not all of these sculptors were in some way poking fun at the Nazi ideals or felt uncomfortable with their subject. And anyway where were the women artists in all this?

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